STONE AGE ECONOMY OF EASTERN INDIA

By

Madan Mohan Singh

As in other parts of the world in India also man had to pass through the various stages of technological evolution in his economic life. The main stages of economic evolution have been more or less the same every where. In India, we find that man passed through at least four Stone Ages, Copper Age, and Iron Age in the process of his techonological evolution. It is the technological evolution which largely determines the nature of economic pursuits of human societies. There is sufficient evidence of the existence of the Palaeolithic (Early and Middle Stone Ages), Mesolithic (Late Stone Age) and the Neolithic cultures in Eastern India.

The Early or the Old Stone Age man roamed all over India except Saurashtra, Kerala, the Tinnevelly District, Assam and Kashmir proper.[1] All these regions also witnessed the Middle Palaeolithic or the Middle Stone Age except Saurashtra and West Rajasthan.[2] In Eastern India the Palaeolithic tools come mostly from the Chotanagpur region which has yielded tools belonging to the Stone as well as Copper Ages.[3]

Childe calls the Early men Food-Gatherers. These men snared and hunted wild animals and birds, caught fishes and lizards, collected wild fruits, shell, fish and eggs, and dug for roots and grubbs.[4] The Palaeolithic men lived in the river-valleys of the forest regions where natural conditions were favourable for human life. There are only a few Palaeolithic caves identified in India, but the location of Palaeolithic sites in the country shows that the early man preferred to live on the

---

1. Sankalia, H. D., *Pre-history & Protohistory in India and Pakistan*, p. 67.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid*, p. 23; Dani, A. H., *Pre-history and Protohistory of Eastern India*, pp. 17-25 ; The author in course of his recent exploration of the Sankha and North koel river-valleys in the north-west region of Ranchi district discovered a number of interesting sites which have yielded lithic tools of Early, Middle and Late Stone Ages. The regions explored had not been touched as yet, and the finds from these regions suggest that the area was the scene of very rich Palaeolithic settlements.
4. Childe, V. G., *Man Makes Himself*, Third ed., p. 51.

banks of rivers and hunted animals and birds on the terraces. At this stage man was completely dependent on nature for his source of food and hence his habitats were such places where he could get wild fruits and roots easily, where animals and birds of game were available and where water-supply was ensured by nearby springs. Some men lived in natural caves and some made shelters on the branches of trees. For clothing, they used skins of animals and barks of trees.

These early men whether in India or China or Africa did not live beyond the age of forty.[5] This high mortality rate was mainly due to the nomadic nature of life determined by the availability of food. Another reason of the early man's short life was his physical inferiority in comparison with the wild beasts. Nature was unkind to him and he had yet to explore means to equip himself for facing the challenge of nature. His dependence on nature for his food supply was also responsible for the thin population during this phase. The number of sites and their richness in South-East India imply that the Palaeolithic population was probably dense in this region.[6] This would further suggest that natural conditions in this region were more favourable for human life in the Palaeolithic Age.

In the Middle Stone Age man became better equipped to deal with his environment. During this phase we find all over the country a switch over to the fine grained stones such as agate, chert, jasper, etc. The strategraphic position of this phase is indicated in the Narsimhapur, Bombay and Maheshwar area.[7] The Middle Stone Age has certain elements which recall those of Europe and Africa. Two of its most characteristic tool types—scrapers and points—definitely indicate a change in the hunting method of the people who made them Bows and arrows, and spokeshaves were introduced which supplemented the earlier methods of sharing and capturing the game.[8] In Europe, they made many varieties of tools adapted to particular uses; they made tools for making tools. They began to work on bone and ivory as skilfully as flints.[9]

---

5. Sankalia, H D , *Pre-history & Protohistory in India & Pakistan*, p. 71.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Subbarao, B., *The Personality of India*, p. 39.
8. Sankalia, H D., From Food Collection to Urbanisation, *Indian Anthropology*, p. 74.
9. Childe, V. G., *Man Makes Himself*, p. 56.

The nature of tools and the places where they were found suggest that man in this age lived in a wooded landscape which lies within the tropical or semi-tropical belt in India.[10] He was still a food-gatherer and hunter but a more skilled one. There was skill and selectivity in his food habits.[11] The animals which he hunted included *Bos nomadicus Falconer* and probably the *Elephas anticus, Equus, Rhinoceros,* Hippopotamus, deer, etc.[12]

As in Europe, Africa and several parts of Asia, in India as well great climatic changes took place towards the end of the Palaeolithic period which changed the environment of man and subsequently his mode of living. In Europe, as shown by Clark, the conditions under which man lived in the Mesolithic Age were far different from those that existed when the upper Palaeolithic men lived in the caves and rock shelters of France, England, Germany, Czechoslovakia, etc. The cold had gone and also the large animals—mammoth, reindeer, cave-bear and others. A more temperate, genial climate had come and the country had become comparatively barren and open. Of course, there were wide regional differences, but the one characteristic that ties together all these areas and the cultures unearthed from them is a tiny stone implement, generally called the microlith. The microlith has several divisions and groups.[13] All the regions of microlithic industries in India which have been studied reveal that an environmental change definitely took place though differing in intensity and nature from region to region. But on the whole a climate drier than in the preceding phase may be postulated genrally.[14]

Microlithic sites are widely distributed in India except in the states of Assam, Punjab, and Kerala. In Eastern India, the most important sites are in the Damodar Valley.[15] Singrauli basin in Mirzapur district

---

10. Sankalia, H. D., From Food Collection to Urbanisation in India, *Indian Anthropology,* p. 75.

11. Subbarao, B. Archaeology and Anthropology in India, *Indian Anthropology,* p. 113.

12. Sankalia, H. D., From Food Collection to Urbanisation in India, *Indian Anthropology,* p 74.

13. *Ibid., Pre-history & Protohistory in India and Pakistan,* pp. 125-26.

14. *Ibid.,* From Food Collection to Urbanisation in India, *Indian Anthropology,* p. 82.

15. Birbhanpur is the most important site on the bank of Damodar Valley.

and Mayurbhanj, Keonjer and Sundergarh in Orissa.[16] All the districts of Chotanagpur except Palamau and the adjoining districts of West Bangal and Orissa have yielded microliths.[17]

The Mesolithic people lived a life of hunting and selective food-fathering. Their activities included drawing paintings on the walls of their cave-dwellings (as suggested by the Mahadeva Hills), dancing, gathering honey, fighting with wild beasts, besides hunting animals and birds and catching fish. It appears from the evidence of Langhanaj that dog had been domesticated in this period.[18] The Mesolithic people had adapted themselves to the steppes of Europe and the wooded regions of North Africa, and they also lived happily in Central and Southern Africa. In India also they seem to have adapted themselves to the changed environment. In Northern and Central Gujarat the microlithic settlements flourished on the tops and slopes of small hillocks and on river-banks.[19] According to Prof. Zeuner, at the end of the dry phase when slightly damper phase followed, dunes were formed. This phase was again succeeded by a drier one. It was at this stage—sometimes in the late Pleistocene that the dunes were blown over the land surface and later a soil developed on these dunes. The slightly wetter climate led to the formation of large inundation lakes between the hollows of dunes. A nomadic, hunting and fishing people lived on the mounds and along the river-banks. They hunted rhinoceroses, hog deer, buffaloes, antelopes, black bucks and dogs. All these animals including the dog and the buffalo were wild according to the study of Prof. Zeuner.[20] Bones of fishes, vertebra and tortoise shell have also been found.

The location of sites in the south of Bombay suggests that the microlithic people inhabiting the region lived on slightly elevated grounds, usually rocks or hillocks and avoided the dense jungles in the interior. They probably preferred such regions as those which abounded in bananas, coconuts, fish and fowl.[21] The abundance of microlithic sites in the Chotanagpur plateau suggests that forested river-valleys were preferred in Estern India as well.

---

16. Sankalia, H. D., *Pre-history & Protohistory in India and Pakistan*, pp. 132—34.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 129–31
18. Subbarao, B., Archaeology and Anthropology in India, *Indian Archaeology*, p. 107.
19. Sankalia, H. D., From Food Collecting to Urbanisation in India, *Indian Anthropology*, p. 79.
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*, p. 88.

In the three stages suggested above the Stone Age man practised the food-gathering economy. The Early, Middle and late Stone Ages show widespread uniformity, with slight variations, which is broken when man enters into the next stage, i. e. the Neolithic or New Stone Age. In the words of Childe this stage was the first revolution that transformed human economy, gave man control over his own food supply. Man began to plant, cultivate, and improve by selection edible grasses, roots and trees. He succeeded in taming and firmly attaching to his person certain species of animals in return for the fodder he was able to offer, the protection he could offer, and the forethought he could exercise.[22] Agriculture and domestication of animals further imply that man began to live at a fixed place. He also began to turn out pottery. But in some places, e. g. Jarmo, Jericho and Hecilar in Iraq, Palestine and Turkey respectively pre-Pottery Neolithic cultures are known to have flourished.

However, in India the Neolithic cultures are not very well clarified, if we mean revolution analogous to the west. This phase is characterised by polished stone tools which have been found in Bihar, Bengal and Assam in large quantities. In U. P. they are found in the Mirzapur and Banda districts. In the South their widespread use is seen in the central Deccan (Andhra--Karnataka areas), Tamilnad, north of river Cauvery, and along the foot-hills of the Vindyas.[23] In these regions the Neolithic settlements were confined to the deciduous and dry deciduous forest areas. In the Gangetic basin there seems to be a slow movement from the foot-hills into the plains after the introduction of metals, suggesting that the tropical river-basins could only be inhabited after the clearance of the forests with heavy metals.[24]

The Neolithic cultures of eastern India fall into two groups— the Assam complex and the Bengal, Bihar and Orissa complex. Chotanagpur plateau is the most promising region in the second complex, where the terraces overlooking rivers such as Ajai, Kasai, Rupanarayan, Suvarnarekha and its tributaries, the Sanjai, Burhabalanga and so on were once the sites of a widespread Neolithic culture.[25] The evidence

22. Childe, V. G., *Man Makes Himself*, p. 66.

23. Subbarao, B., Archaeology and Anthropology in India, *Indian Anthropology*, p. 108.

24. *Ibid.*

25. Sankalia, H. D., *Pre-history & Protohistory in India and Pakistan*, P. 239,

further shows that stone using economy continued till late in the eastern region of India.

The evidence from Brahmagiri, Maski and Piklihal shows that the Neolithic people made huts on round wooden posts. The square or rectangular exteriors were enclosed with a bamboo matting which was covered with mud, and the floors were plastered with clay and dung, and perhaps also or alternatively with lime, lumps of which were found at Piklihal. These were repeatedly raised or repaired. Sometimes the alignment of the hut was changed. These earliest huts with simple floors might have been made just in front of the sloping surface of a rock or a cave.[26]

The Neolithic communities of South-Eastern India practised primitive type of agriculture, reared animals and depended partly on hunting and fishing. So far no grains or their impression have been found, but the existence of large concave shaped saddle querns and several rubbers or pounders suggest that some kind of grain was available which was coarsely crushed and eaten.[27] The earliest farmers who lived in Madhya Pradesh, in about 2000 B.C. cultivated wheat and rice and five kinds of legumes, viz. Masura (lentils) Urad (black grass), Mung (Green Gram), Vatana or Mutter (green peas) and Lathyrus.[28] All the cereals originally grew in the form of wild grasses in the mountaineous regions before they were domesticated by man. Sickles set with stone teeth were found in large numbers from the Chalcolithic sites in Madhya Pradesh. Among animals, cows, bulls, goats, sheep and probably buffalo seem to have been tended.[29] The earliest peasants at Nevdatoli had domesticated cattle, pigs, sheep and goats.[30]

The Neolithic people turned out pottery in a large variety of colours and shapes. They made dishes, bowls, handled pots, jars, legged stands, perforated pots, etc. and coloured them with various colours such as red, black, chocolate, grey, buff, olive green.[31] The dishes and bowls

26. *Ibid.*, p. 250; Allchin, *Piklihal Excavation*, pp. 22-23.

27. Sankalia, H. D., *Pre-history and Protohistory in India and Pakistan*, p. 250.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 200.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 250

30. *Ibid.*, p, 201.

31. *Ibid.*, pp. 251-52.

would be ordinarily used for eating and drinking, jars for storing and bringing water and for cooking.[32] The evidence from Piklihal, Sangankallu and Brahmagiri shows that all the pottery was hand-made or as maintained by Allchin a part of it was made on turn-table device.[33]

The transition from the food-gathering stage to the food-producing one is not distinctly marked in India. The evidence of the beginning of agriculture comes from the district of Quetta which had an extensive habitation in prehistoric times.[34] Some 5500 years ago the earliest people who lived there in small huts of mud and later of mud bricks formed an extremely primitive pastoral society. They had no pottery. They used skin bags, bone and stone tools. In the next phase at Kili Ghul Mohammed II is seen a fine wheel-made pottery implying the beginning of agriculture and even increase in population. Probably copper had come into use also. The size of the settlements were large. The mud walls of the small homes had foundations of flat stones, and probably doors moved on stone sockets. These people seem to have been cultivating wheat and barley and keeping herds of sheep, goats and cattle as earlier. These settlements gradually gave rise to a number of localised cultures based on a different economic background. The fertile Indus Valley promised agricultural surplus which gave place to still larger settlements, and the rich agricultural villages were soon turned into fine brick built towns and cities, such as Harappa, Mohenjo Daro, Lothal, etc. Thus, the urban civilisation emerged in the Indian sub-continent. But when in the western region a civilisation was flourishing with all its urban characteristics, in the eastern region people continued to live in their old stage. In the south-east they still practised primitive agriculture, reared animals and depended partly on hunting and fishing.[35]

32. *Ibid.*

33. *Ibid.*, p. 250.

34. Sankalia, H.D., From Food Collection to Urbanisation in India, *Indian Anthropology*, pp. 84-85.

35. The Neolithic Cultures of S.E. India, e.g. Piklihal and Utnoor in Andhra which give a Carbon—14 date of 2100 B. C. (4120+150) were contemporary with the urban civilisation of the Indus Valley (Subbarao, B., Archaeogy and Anthropology in India, *Indian Anthropology*, p.114). It was at about this time that the earliest farmers appear in Madhya Pradesh too (Sankalia, H. D., *Pre-history & Protohistory in India and Pakistan*, p.201).

Now, some where into the environment in which Neolithic cultures were flourishing copper and bronze came in and altered the vital pattern. In the riverine sites throughout the Gangetic basin rise settlements after the clearance of forests. Another factor that led to the settelement of the river basins is probably the surviving Harappa civilisation which overlaps with these in time and space.[36] In Eastern India hoards of copper tools and weapons are found in large quantities. The forest regions of the east were inhabited by several indigenous tribes which were economically hunting-fishing communities. It is suggested that the beares of the copper hoard belonged to indigenous tribes, such as Nishādas, Pulindas, Śabarās who were capable of indigenously procuring such fine tools and weapons with the copper ore from Singhbhum in Bihar or/and Rajasthan.[37]

The advent of the iron-using Aryans, must have introduced great changes in the economic pursuits of the people of eastern India. Their advent meant constant warfare with the indigenous tribes who must have refused to accept the domination of the new-comers. This situation must have led to the production of weapons of war in a large scale and the turning of settlements into fortresses. Probably the copper hoards belong to this period in the history of erstern India. The bullock cart as a wheeled vehicle was already in use. The Aryans introduced a fast moving vehicle in the form of chariot. However, the Aryans and the Pre-Aryans did not continue their armed conflict for long. The two streams of the Aryans and Pre-Aryans mingled and the society which now emerged made fast strides in the field of economic life. In the midst of self sufficient villages appeared towns and cities in a good number. They became connected with roads, trade and industries gained stimulus and professions gradually became mutliplied. But while these developments were marked in the society, a section continued to live in the old way. The vast majority of the population remained in the rural stage. In the interiors where the light of civilisation could not penetrate, man continued to live in the stage of Stone Age economy till late.

---

36. Subbarao, B., Archaeelogy & Anthropology in India, *Indian Anthropology*, p. 114.

37. Sankalia, H. D., *Pre-history & Protohistory in India and Pakistan*. pp. 224-25.